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ABSTRACT

An alternate learning experience for senior, baccalaureate-level nursing students enrolled in the Practicum in Nursing Leadership at East Carolina University School of Nursing is described. The major objective of this course is to help students develop leadership skills. During the first half of the semester the students, who are registered nurses, complete a structured leadership experience in an acute care setting. An alternate learning experience utilizing a learning contract is an option for the second half of the semester. The clinical instructor works closely with the student in the implementation of the learning contract. During the 1982-1983 academic year 14 students selected an alternate learning experience as part of their practicum. As part of an evaluation, students indicated reasons for selecting the alternate experience. Several students felt they had gained knowledge/competence in the auditing process, the teaching role, leadership theory, and independence, as well as in nursing care planning, quality assurance, and management theories. Other leadership/management skills attained in the alternate learning experience are identified, along with the 14 learning experiences selected by the participants. A learning contract form is included. (SW)

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Contract Learning: A Leadership Experience

for the RN Student in a BSN Program

Introduction

As the number of nurses seeking a bachelor of science degree in nursing rapidly increases, faculty are confronted with a challenging teaching opportunity. The RN comes to a baccalaureate program with characteristics and needs which differ widely from the generic student population.¹ Even within the RN student population there is wide diversity in age, background and experience. Muzio and Ohashi question whether educational structures or processes which were developed originally for generic students are appropriate for RN students because of their unique adult learner characteristics.²

Rationale and Design of Alternate Learning Experience

In an effort to meet these special needs, an alternate learning experience was provided as an option for RN senior nursing students enrolled in the Practicum in Nursing Leadership at East Carolina University School of Nursing in Greenville, North Carolina. The major objective of this three semester hour clinical course, which is taken concurrently with a two semester hour theory course, was to provide opportunity for the senior nursing student to further develop competencies in leadership skills. During the first half of the semester, the RN students were required to complete a structured leadership experience in an acute care setting managing the care of twelve patients. An alternate learning experience utilizing a learning contract was provided as an option for the second half of the semester.

The learning contract was utilized as a teaching/learning strategy for the alternate learning experience. The National League for Nursing recommends that in baccalaureate programs "the learning experiences are sufficiently flexible to

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permit students to develop in accordance with their individual talents and needs".³

It was felt that a learning contract would allow the RN student the opportunity to be involved in identifying and defining his/her own specific learning needs within the realm of nursing leadership. As Knowles points out there is strong evidence from both psychotherapeutical and developmental psychological research that a prime characteristic of adulthood is the need and capacity to be self-directing.⁴ The learning contract would allow for individuality, flexibility, achievement of personal goals and objectives, independence, as well as meeting the basic course objective. Rauwen and Waring see the contract as a device that allows the student more independence and places the teacher in a consultant role. They stress the idea of a student and instructor working together to facilitate learning.⁵

The clinical instructor worked closely with the RN student as he/she designed and implemented their learning contract (Figure 1). Numerous student-instructor conferences were held throughout each semester to guide, counsel and facilitate the learning experience. Each student was to select a preceptor with at least BSN preparation to serve as a resource during their alternate learning experience.

Background

In the 1982-83 academic year there were eighteen RN senior nursing students enrolled in the Practicum in Nursing Leadership. A questionnaire was developed by the authors to determine the effectiveness of this course as perceived by the students. All students completed the questionnaire. There was wide diversity among the respondents in age, background and preparation (Table 1). The nursing careers of the respondents included a variety of areas including psychiatry, pediatrics, community health, medicine, surgery and specialty units with experience ranging from six months to twenty-five years.

The four students who elected not to participate in an alternate experience

stated they selected this option because they needed more experience and familiarity in a large acute care setting, needed to gain more self confidence in their nursing skills and needed more experience in providing direct patient care. Fourteen (77.8%) of the RN senior nursing students selected an alternate learning experience as part of their Practicum. A variety of reasons were described by the participants.

FIGURE 1

LEARNING CONTRACT FOR PRACTICUM IN NURSING LEADERSHIP

INSTITUTION:

COURSE:

RESOURCE PERSON:

CLINICAL SITE:

TIME SCHEDULE:

OBJECTIVE/ COMPETENCY	RESOURCES & STRATEGIES	EVIDENCE OF LEARNING	TARGET DATE	HOW ACHIEVEMENT OF OBJECTIVES CAN BE VALIDATED

TABLE I

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF RN STUDENTS ENROLLED IN
PRACTICUM IN NURSING LEADERSHIP IN 1982-83

CATEGORY	NUMBER	PERCENT
Sex		
Female	16	88.89
Male	2	11.11
Age		
20-25	8	44.44
26-30	5	27.78
31-35	2	11.11
36-40	2	11.11
Over 40	1	5.55
Basic Nursing Education Preparation		
Diploma	9	50
Associate Degree	9	50
Year Completed Basic Nursing Program		
1950-1959	1	5.55
1960-1969	1	5.55
1970-1979	9	50
1980-1982	7	38.89

A summary of statements related to why the study population selected an alternate learning experience is presented in Table 2. Five (35.7%) of the total study population revealed that it was more convenient in travel time than to commute an average of 60 miles. Three (21.4%) wanted to function independently; three (21.4%) had specific goals for their future nursing career; and three (21.4%) had special leadership problems they wanted to solve with the alternate project.

TABLE II

SUMMARY STATEMENTS OF WHY STUDY POPULATION
SELECTED AN ALTERNATE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

STATEMENTS	*RESPONDENTS
More convenient in travel time and less expensive than commuting (Range 45-80 miles.)	5 (35.7%)
Can function independently.	3 (21.4%)
Special career goals:	
Will meet specific nursing needs and interest for future nursing career.	
Want additional experience in management role (Budget).	
Want to observe leadership in action on a Pediatric Unit.	3 (21.4%)
Special leadership problems:	
Have a special leadership problem want to solve with the alternate project.	
Have observed in working CCU inappropriate staffing patterns and want to work with head nurse in dealing with the current staffing irregularities to see if changes can be made.	
Want to demonstrate through the auditing process the importance of a diabetic teaching position.	3 (21.4%)
Want to learn more about leadership and managerial roles rather than technical aspects of direct care.	2 (14.3%)
Better learning experience doing something I have never done before.	1 (7.1%)
Can explore more the leadership role than one aspect of nursing practice.	1 (7.1%)
Statements by *respondents equal more than 100% as more than one response provided.	

Implementation

The specific learning experiences selected by the fourteen senior RN participants is revealed in Table 3. Three (21.4%) designed and/or presented Inservice programs on special nursing problem areas, i.e. transfer of patients from Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to Post Intensive Care Unit (PICU), described a nursing care plan (NCP) format for Pediatric patients or designed an Inservice class on Pediatric nursing care plans for Pediatric nurses. Three (21.4%) developed a staffing and/or scheduling pattern for different nursing areas, i.e. a selected medical unit, a selected Coronary Care Unit (CCU) and a large Emergency Room (ER). Two (14.3%) conducted retrospective audits and one developed the audit tool. Two (14.3%) prepared budgets. One budget was for a proposed 18 bed surgical unit and the other for a 12 bed medical Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

Outcome

The total study population stated that they had met their objectives in their alternate learning experiences. Thirteen respondents stated they had attained leadership/management knowledge in the following areas: three (23%) in auditing process, three (23%) in teaching role, two (15%) in Leadership theory and two (15%) in the area of independence. Three respondents stated they had gained knowledge in one of the following three areas: nursing care plans (NCP), a Quality Assurance program or Management theories (Figure 2).

Figure 3 reveals that the responses by the fourteen participants equal more than 100% as some of the respondents provided more than one leadership/management skill gained in the alternate learning experience. These responses include the following skills areas: five (18%) administrative, four (14%) communication, four (14%) motivation, three (11%) change agent, three (11%) staffing and scheduling, two (7%) decision-making and two (7%) budgets.

TABLE III

7

LEARNING EXPERIENCES SELECTED BY
FOURTEEN SENIOR RN PARTICIPANTS

FOURTEEN LEARNING EXPERIENCES

1. Audited charts of 20 diabetic patients, developed and presented an Inservice on the Audit results.
 2. Presented to PICU nursing staff the new protocol on transfer of patients from ICU to PICU by demonstration with selected patients and provided an Inservice.
 3. Audited Renal Transplant patients' charts, developed an audit tool, identified problem areas and made recommendations to the Renal Transplant Nurse Specialist.
 4. Researched and developed a staffing pattern for four weeks for a selected medical unit.
 5. Researched staffing and scheduling alternatives and developed two varying schedules utilizing 8 hours and 12 hours for a 6 week period for a selected CCU. Participant served as Charge Nurse for 8 hours in CCU under her nurse preceptor, participated in Charge Nurse situations and developed a self-evaluation tool.
 6. Designed an Inservice class on Nursing Care Plans for Pediatric patients for staff nurses.
 7. Developed a questionnaire, interviewed staff, compiled results and made recommendations for further study on "Clustering of Patients" that had just been initiated in an acute care setting.
 8. Researched Quality Assurance Program in a selected hospital by conducting conferences with Quality Assurance Coordinator and team, and observation of Quality Assurance Program.
 9. Prepared a budget for a proposed 18 bed surgical unit in an acute care setting.
 10. Developed a staffing pattern for an E.R. in a large acute care setting.
 11. Designed a teaching program for ICU nurses on endotracheal tube care.
 12. Identified a leadership problem that was handled ineffectively and practiced an alternate communication pattern utilizing role playing after researching literature and interviewing experts in the field.
 13. Developed a budget for a 12 bed medical ICU.
 14. Developed a new nursing care plan format for Pediatric patients and provided an Inservice for nursing staff.
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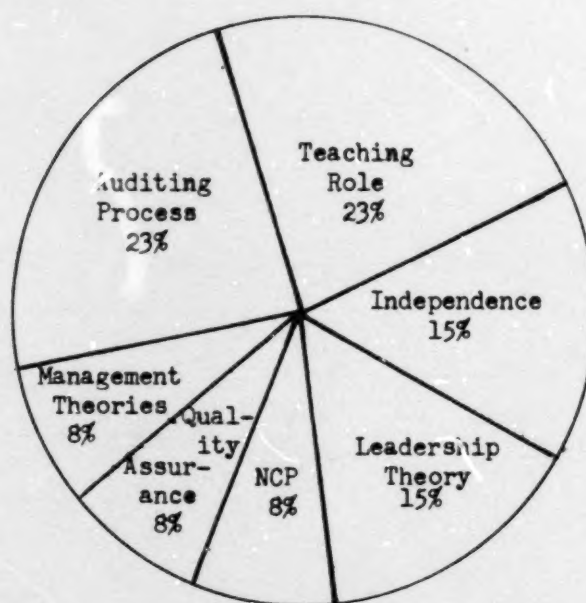


Fig. 2. A percentage distribution of responses provided by the study population to leadership/management knowledge attained in the alternate learning experience.

Five respondents stated they had achieved skills in one of the following five areas: nursing audit, research, leadership, collaboration and assertiveness. One respondent added that she did not feel any leadership competencies were gained in her learning experience. Another participant stated she "learned more about nursing care plans (NCP) but not nursing leadership".

The majority of the students cited that writing the learning contract was the most difficult aspect of their alternate learning experience. Knowles concurs with this idea, as he states that many students find that the idea of constructing learning contracts for the first time is so strange that they become over-anxious. He believes they have been so conditioned to having teachers tell them what they are to learn and how they are to learn it that they become confused and worried when confronted with the responsibility of thinking through what they want to learn and how they will go about learning it.⁴

Kruse and Barger cite that the learning contract allows the student to make an independent decision about what he/she wants to learn relative to course objectives and permits them to set individual goals and levels of achievement.⁶ This supports how the participants felt as they overwhelmingly identified increased independence and expansion of knowledge in areas of interest as being the most beneficial aspects of the alternate learning experience. A few of the positive evaluative student statements were:

"It was a venture into discovering things for yourself."

"I felt like an adult person meeting my learning needs rather than a college student performing an assignment."

"I was able to function at my own pace, at my own level of expertise and on a project I felt beneficial to me."

All participants stated that they would elect to do an alternate learning experience again and would recommend this option to other students.

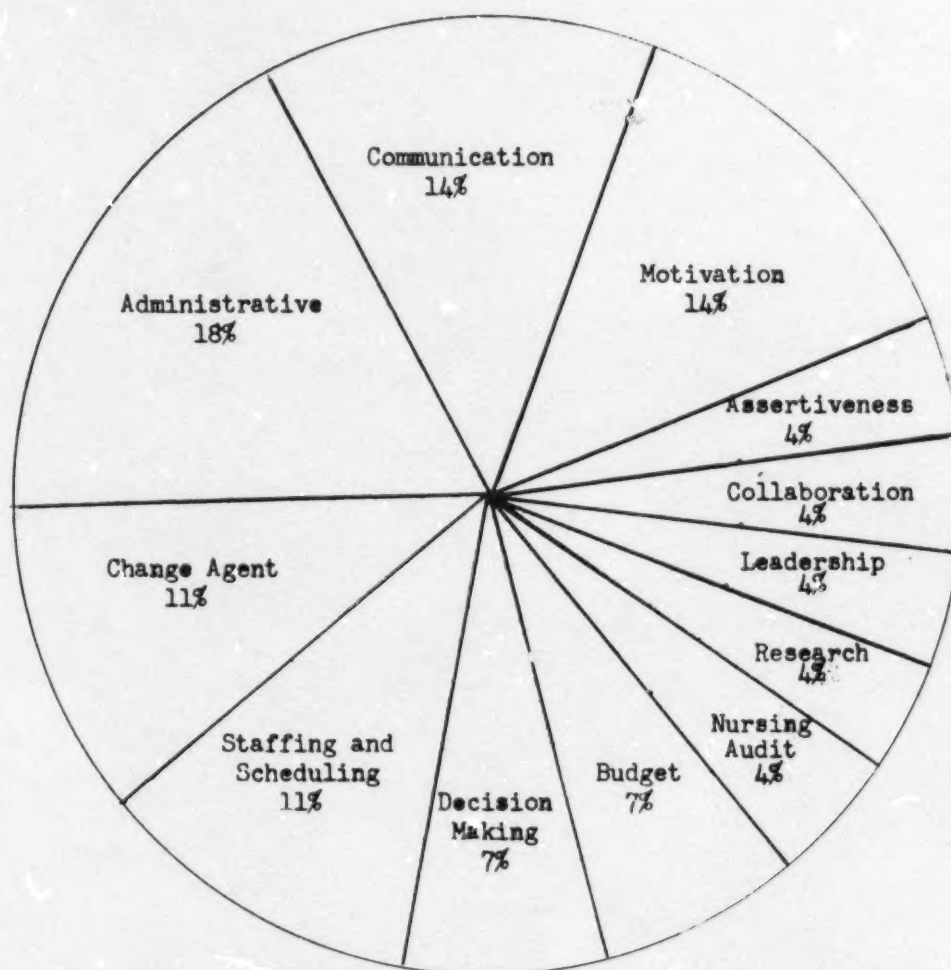


Fig. 3. A *percentage distribution of responses provided by the study population to leadership/management skills attained in the alternate learning experience.

*Percentage distribution of responses equal more than 100% as more than one response provided.

Conclusion

The alternate learning experience utilizing the learning contract has proven to be an effective teaching strategy in meeting the unique needs of the RN student. It proved to be an excellent vehicle for meeting learner career goals in concurrence with course objectives and in providing learner satisfaction. The authors are pleased with the use of a contract for the alternate learning experience and as a methodology to facilitate the adult learner's development of leadership competencies.

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